

FSA CALIFORNIA EMPLOYEES GET RECOGNITION FOR THEIR OUTSTANDING OUTREACH EFFORTS

Lavon Treasure, FLM from Merced and Vivian Soffa, CED from Salinas both receive the prestigious 2006 Administrators Award for Extra Mile Service



Lavon Treasure, Vivian Soffa, and FSA Administrator Teresa Lasseter
at the
2006 Administrator's Awards Ceremony

Vivian and Lavon were recently interviewed and asked the following questions and here are their answers:

1) What is your job title and how long have you been working for FSA?

Vivian: County Executive Director, covering Monterey, Santa Cruz, San Mateo counties. I was hired from the “outside” as a COT in 1989 and trained under Jeff Yasui in San Joaquin County. I came to the Salinas office in 1990.

Lavon: I am the Farm Loan Manager for the Merced and Salinas offices. This also covers the Madera and Hollister areas. I started working for the agency in the spring of 1990, after working my way through college working for the USDA Ag Research Service.

2) How did you find out that you had received the Administrators Award and what was your first reaction to that news?

Vivian: I found out about the award from an email from Washington DC congratulating me. I didn’t even know what it was and contacted my District Director (Chris Keeler) for clarification. He indicated that he and the SED put Lavon Treasure and my name in for an award for the outreach we have done in our area.

Lavon: I had received an e-mail and a letter from the National office on the same day. I was very surprised, honored and humble in receiving this award.

3) Over the years you have been doing a lot of ‘outreach’ work that has resulted in your receiving the Administrators Award. Tell us about the types of work you are doing within the communities.

Vivian: I now do outreach as a routine part of my job, to Hispanic producers, Asian producers and women producers. When I started in this office in 1990, we served approximately 5 Hispanic producers. Now, on the average we serve over 100 Hispanic producers.

Vivian’s outreach efforts extend over the years:

- 1995 through 2000. She formed and participated in the Joint Agency Outreach Task Force in Monterey and Santa Cruz counties with other federal, state and county agencies to identify minority farmer needs and provide coordinated assistance, as needed
- Developed a 4-week Farm Bookkeeping course, taught in Spanish to approximately 35 Spanish speaking farmers
- Translated general and special newsletters and other agency information into Spanish
- She increased the number of bilingual county office staff
- Increased number of Hispanic COC members, and Advisors to the COC

Lavon: We have worked hard in bringing the FSA loan program to the Hispanic communities. Since the mid 1990's when we made EM loans in the Salinas Valley, we have worked closely with the Hispanic farmers. We work with them on a one on one basis or in group meetings, teaching them about the program and how to complete an application, and how to keep a record keeping book. We have also worked with our local Ag lenders in joint meetings in providing our programs to the farmers. In the beginning much of the information about FSA went out in the local news paper, and the radio in Spanish. Most farmers know each other and word of mouth has also been a great help to inform farmers about our programs. Most of all I try to treat our farmers the way I would want to be treated. We can't help everyone, but we are here to assist the farmers with the tools we have been given to the best of our ability.

4) Is there a 'rewarding' experience that you have had and or a 'success' story that you can share that has been the result of helping others in your 'outreach' work?

Vivian: (a) In February of 1998, there was a joint effort of UC Coop Extension and FSA that is memorable. We planned and carried out a basic bookkeeping course for Hispanic producers. There was so much difficulty with people applying for programs because of limited bookkeeping skills; we decided to assist in teaching them, instead of criticizing them. It took a lot of effort. It was a weekly evening class for 4 weeks, conducted primarily in Spanish. We had everyone bring their "box" of paperwork from home, we assisted in organizing their files, looking at revenue, costs, crop yields, and ultimately ended up with them doing their own cash flow statement during the last class. We issued certificates of completion, took photos, and had a small "graduation" ceremony. Students had to attend all courses to graduate. Approximately 35 people graduated, and for some, this was the first academic experience they ever had. They really loved it and we actually had a waiting list for this course. (It was a *ton* of work to do however!)

(b) I took Spanish language classes so I could communicate with our Spanish speaking producers better – I can now have a very basic conversation with a producer in Spanish and enroll them in programs.

Lavon: There have been farmers that started with the FSA loan program that have graduated to other credit. A few years ago we had a success story that was printed in our National FSA news letter, about one of our raspberry Hispanic farmers that received an FSA loan and a few years later was about to get a guarantee loan with another lender.

5) On June 27, 2006, you went to Washington, DC to accept the award. Describe that day for us and how you felt about it.

Vivian: In DC we were broken into groups and "mentored" for the day prior to the award ceremony. We sat in a staff meeting of the department heads, met many of the program specialists, and had a reception in Administrator Lasseter's office. I have been to DC several times, but it is always nice to meet the people associated with the names we regularly see. The ceremony was held in the inside Plaza and was fairly formal. It was quite an honor to hear the descriptions of all of the awardees work, including ours, at that moment. I would describe it as a bit surreal.

Lavon: The National Office staff treated us very well. For the loan team awardees we met with Chris Beyerhelm, Assistant Deputy Administrator, who took us around to the different loan departments where we visited with staff members about our awards, and they shared with us about their departments. The highlight of the day was to spend time personally visiting with Carolyn Cooksie, DAFLP, and Teresa Lasseter, FSA Administrator, in their offices. With our families, we also had lunch with Ms. Cooksie. In the afternoon we had the award ceremony where we had pictures taken and received our award with a few comments from Teresa Lasseter. A side note: Washington D.C. received more rain in a three day period the week we were there than any time recorded in history...so they say! We did not let this dampen our spirits!

6) What progress if any do you feel has been done in FSA outreach from your perspective?

Vivian: Since I started at FSA, the progress in outreach has increased ten-fold. I think our limitation in this area now is primarily related to budget constraints and staffing. Obviously, we could do much more if we won the lottery!

Lavon: FSA has made progress in the outreach program over the last 10 years. From what I have heard, California is one of the highest, if not the highest success story in outreach in the nation. Maybe this is because we have so much diversity in California.

7) Are there any lessons learned and tips on what works or what doesn't in doing outreach in California that you would share with other individuals that are involved in doing outreach in California either in other counties or other agencies?

Vivian: What works and doesn't work for people in outreach depends on many variables. The reason why our bookkeeping course worked is that we brought it to the skill and language level of our constituents. There have been many other bookkeeping courses before that were designed for very educated producers, and these were not successful at all.

It also takes a lot of time for outreach to be effective. The producers that did not trust us at all now are much more comfortable in calling or coming in to ask questions and apply for programs. I try to visit some of the farms of Hispanic growers each year -- there is no substitute for one-to-one contact and follow-up with producers in building a trusting, business relationship.

And last but not least, I rely on my well-trained staff, both bilingual and non-bilingual. Nothing sends a better "outreach" message than a staff person who is kind to a first time producer and knowledgeable about the program they are enrolling the producer in.

Lavon: Everyone should be treated equally. We should be showing this type of treatment in our everyday workplace as we work with the farmers and our coworker.

(Interview was conducted by Slade Childers, Farm Loan PT in Tulare County.)